

## Rise or fall? The stature of Heroic Romance

‘Romance is at the same time one of the constituent parts and one of the enemies of epic poetry.’ (Ker, 1897, 19)

### Preface: heroes.

Any heroic tale, whether epic or romance, prose or verse, must feature a hero or heroes. What is a hero? Heroes are extant in the earliest of mythological, legendary and poetic writings, as well as in romances, novels, fantasy fiction and everyday life. They may be described as persons of outstanding courage, physical prowess or strength. Another definition might characterise a hero as something of a misfit, someone different from the majority of their peers, given to leaving the familiar bounds of the community and wandering off to strange places, perhaps coming back with something slightly different about them. A figure from contemporary life often described as a hero is the firefighter, particularly one who has rescued a cat from fire or from entanglement in a tall tree.<sup>1</sup> These ventures require both exceptional courage and a willingness to go where most would not.

Gilgamesh, an early hero of mythology, figures in a tale from 2,000 BCE, often called the world’s oldest epic. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both packed with heroes, date to between 750 and 650 BCE. The *Argonautica* of Apollonius is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE. Virgil, 70-19 BCE, composed his *Aeneid* after the style of Homer. I mention these classical and pre-classical heroes because they are the foundation of the heroic mode, of its epic origins, and for many centuries after the end of the classical world they dominated the notions of what a hero should be in the minds of educated Europeans. (Bowra, 1952, 2) When lyrics were needed (c1735-1750) for the popular marching tune since known as *The British Grenadiers*, no thought was given to Beowulf or Sigurðr: heroes were still classical: ‘Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules/ Of Hector and Lysander, and such great names as these...’<sup>2</sup>

During what are traditionally called the European ‘Dark Ages’, not everyone was educated. Classical and religious – written – learning, lay in the hands of those who could read and write Latin.<sup>3</sup> Most of these were ordained clergy, and their pupils who also sought the religious life, along

<sup>1</sup> Cats given oxygen by ‘hero’ firefighters in blazing house fire; rescue ‘saved little souls’. The Express Newspaper, Feb 15, 2021

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_British\\_Grenadiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_British_Grenadiers)

<sup>3</sup> For some insights into literature and languages in the 14th century I suggest Jones, Who murdered Chaucer? 2003. See also Saintsbury, 1897, Chapter 2 for the growth of literatures in post-Latin European languages.

with some of the sons and daughters of the nobility. There was some clerical disapproval of interest in heroic adventure tales; in 797 Alcuin asked regarding one popular hero; 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' (Bowra, 1952, 422) Though versions of classical tales circulated in vernacular languages, by contrast the traditional vernacular tales of northern epic heroes and their romance descendants were not the academic consideration of the learned. Tales of northern Europe, both Germanic and Celtic, flourished rather in courtly and popular settings. Delivery of these was generally oral though many survive in written form.

The heroes of the north came back into academic awareness during the nineteenth century, with the opening up of antiquarianism from a hobby to an academic discipline, or rather several disciplines including philology, folk-lore studies and history. With the reshaping of Europe after the Napoleonic period and the growth of ideas of nationhood, there was a scramble to rediscover the ancient beliefs and tales by many nations in Europe. Germanic, Scandinavian and Celtic tales became evidence of the roots of nationalism; they also became a new area of literary studies. There was an outbreak of publishing of very old texts; for example, those of The Early English Text Society (EETS). This was founded in 1864 in order to bring previously unprinted Early English literature within the reach of students and to supply a source of citations for the New (now Oxford) English Dictionary. A glance at the EETS list<sup>4</sup> reveals many romances and many of the epics that preceded or accompanied them.

There was a concomitant outbreak of critical and historical writings about these old texts, and it is among these latter that this paper sources its subject. What did these still-remembered pioneers of the lore of medieval literature think and write about the evolution of romance out of heroic epic? Which of their thoughts are still relevant to the rebirth of heroic romance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and to modern critical thought? The paper will focus on texts about texts, rather than on heroic and romantic texts themselves. It will seek to show that there was some critical disagreement as to whether Romance constituted a rise or a fall from the standard of epic (heroic) texts, among the great names of nineteenth and twentieth century critical writing. It will then turn to later commentators to see whether their writings move beyond that dualistic assessment.

Key words: Epic; Heroic; Romance; Fantasy.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~eets/>

## Part One: The quest for purity

‘It’s a trap, this matter of definition, and I can’t think of a more boring academic subject.’ (Stephen King, 1982, *Danse macabre*, page 30.)

These ‘pioneer’ works were principally focused on matters of definition, classification/typology and description. Yet because a critical work is old, and expressive of assumptions that may not all please the modern reader, it need not be abandoned. Perhaps sadly, to obtain a print edition of W. P. Ker’s *The Dark Ages* (1904) my cheapest option was the ‘Forgotten Books’ Classic Reprint Series. However, a book retrieved in this way may then cease to be ‘forgotten’, while the current phenomenon of being able to purchase electronic editions of the complete works of critics from this period – Hector Munro Chadwick for example – at ridiculously low cost<sup>5</sup>, may help to retrieve a sense of continuity between historical periods of literature and criticism, however much their approaches may seem, at first sight, to differ.

Ker’s *The dark ages* is Volume I of a series called ‘European Literature’, edited by George Saintsbury. (1897-1907) That the series begins with the ‘dark’ ages indicates a sense of separation from the classical period, heroic though that was. Critics now worked on examining the literature of the Middle Ages in the expectation of finding the surviving works of the period worthy of study. Ker defines the scope of his study:

The Middle Age...distinctly meant at first the time between ancient and modern civilisation. (Ker, 1897, 1)

Ker states clearly that the idea of this intervening period as a time of unrelenting darkness in terms of learning and literature is wrong, and goes on to show the worth of much of the body of work that survives: epic and heroic, religious and secular, historical and poetic. Although his longest section is on Latin authors, he has much to say about the northern scene that is perhaps most dominant in twentieth and twenty-first century genres of fantasy fiction deriving from epic/heroic and romance/*aventure* precursors.

The Old English epic poetry, with *Beowulf* as its chief extant work, is properly valued by historians as giving the only narrative poems in an old Teutonic dialect that in

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<sup>5</sup> Although it should be noted that there can be page number discrepancies and lack of full bibliographical details in some electronic editions.

respect of their scale can be compared with the epics of other lands. (Ker, 1897, 249)

Although it was Ker who pointed out the 'defect' in *Beowulf* of having 'the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges,' (Ker, 1897, 253) —later lamented by Tolkien as having made this judgment 'a commonplace even of the best criticism'— (Tolkien, 1983, 11) this should not be held against him. He was not the only critic of his time to focus on delineating what a 'true' epic/heroic work 'should' be. The presence of monsters and the supernatural was seen as evidence of a distasteful mingling of epic with mythology and romance. Perhaps influenced by a general concept of 'progress' in the Victorian era, in arts, sciences and historical thought, there was a tendency to seek for progress in literary development. The word 'primitive', still then in use as a label for pre-industrial societies and for the people who lived in them, is readily found in literary critical writing. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* (1952) also reveals a desire to order and organise types of literature in a model perhaps owing something to Darwinism.

Although published almost fifty years after Ker's *Dark Ages*, Bowra refers to *Heroic Poetry* as 'a development of some work I did twenty-five years ago when I was studying the Homeric poems.' (Bowra, 1952, v) The new work is to be a comparative study of other works of the same kind. Despite the time lapse between publication of the two works, Bowra and Ker display the same assumption of there being a 'pure heroic' that is to be distinguished from other kinds thought of as immature or primitive. Bowra mentions ancient Israel, for example, with the comment 'In Israel lament and panegyric failed to mature not only into heroic poetry but into heroic saga.' (Bowra, 1952, 15) Twentieth and twenty-first century critical approaches to literary kinds, might perceive this notion that one kind of poetry has 'failed to progress' as somewhat odd. He further suggests 'In some countries a heroic poetry may come into existence but fail to be maintained in its full character.' (Bowra, 1952, 15)

This long quotation expresses well the sense of heroic poetry as something to be striven for and earlier forms as simply its precursors, 'leading up' to its perceived virtues:

Heroic poetry, then, resembles panegyric and lament in its general outlook and *primitive* pre-heroic poetry in much of its technique. It is dangerous to deduce too much from this, but, if we are right in thinking that panegyric and lament represent a stage earlier than that of objective heroic poetry, it is possible that the latter comes into existence when pre-heroic, shamanistic poetry is touched by the spirit of

panegyric or lament, and the result is a new kind of poetry which keeps the form of objective narrative but uses it to tell stories which embody a new ideal of manhood. Once a society has come to see that man will do more by his own efforts than by a belief in magic, and to believe that such efforts do him credit, it alters its whole philosophy. (Bowra, 1952, 16) (my italics)

All these works are too long, and this paper too short, to describe each work in its entirety. Bowra's final chapter, on the decline of heroic poetry, discusses social, cultural, historical and literary changes as effecting the passing of heroic epic into romance:

A second transformation of heroic poetry comes when it passes into what is conveniently called romance. Romance is a vague term, but at least it suggests anything which is not real or even believed to be real by the poets themselves, who advance it as a charming fancy and ask it to be accepted as such. In other words, while strictly heroic poems claim to deal with a past which once existed, though its date may not be known, romance claims to be nothing but delightful and is quite content to be accepted at its own valuation. It may still use the episodes and characters of heroic poetry, but in a different way with a new intention. We are expected to admire not so much the human qualities of heroes as the brilliant inventions and tender sentiments of the poets. (Bowra, 1952, 543)

He attributes much of the change to 'the courtly love ideal.' (Bowra, 1952, 544) In those pages, immediately following the heading 'Decline', Bowra's critical description changes its vocabulary, admitting into use such words and phrases as: not real; charming fancy; nothing but delightful; tender sentiments; softens; fancy. Like the words 'primitive' and 'shamanic' at the beginning of the work and throughout its pages, these words carry with them an undervaluing of the 'primitive' and the 'upstart form'. 'Decline' itself might just as easily have been 'Successors.' These two shorter quotations are more overtly negative:

the taste for romance can transform and spoil popular stories about an eminent hero. (Bowra, 1952, 545)

The whole of this transformation into romance may be regarded as the intrusion into narrative of a spirit which likes to linger on the elegances of life (Bowra, 1952, 548)

Bowra not only knew everything there is to know about heroic poetry, he was a strong admirer of and advocate for it and feels a personal regret at its passing. Even his admission that the process of change may be inevitable is tinged with a little resentment:

We might almost conclude that the transition from heroic poetry to romance is a natural change, which comes when feudal society has ceased to believe in its old standards and turns for inspiration to something more courtly and more complicated. (Bowra, 1952, 546)

Bowra's sense of the heroic as developing out of and improving on pre-heroic verse has in a way set him up for disappointment when romance comes along and, as it seems to him, lowers the standard. His sense that a downgrading has occurred undercuts his preferred pattern of steady improvement in all human endeavour.

H.M. Chadwick's *The Heroic Age* (1912) shares with Ker and Bowra an encyclopaedic knowledge of heroic epic and a passion for the subject. He covers Teutonic and Greek epic in depth, with some reference to other traditions. However, the focus of the books is just such as Tolkien refers to in *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. (1983, 7-8) Chadwick's subject in *The Heroic Age*, is in essence historical and appropriate use is made of non-literary sources in records and archaeology; however, the discussions of the epics are used in the service of history, rather than in a literary-critical way, through much of the text. One example of many is this recourse to Beowulf when assessing the importance of bonds of kinship:

instances of the slaying of kinsmen seem to have been by no means uncommon in the Heroic Age. In Beowulf the spokesman of the Danish kings, Unferð, is said to have killed his brothers, and though the fact was a reproach to him, it apparently did not prevent him from holding an important office at court. (Chadwick, 1912, 345)

Tolkien's allegory of the tower that was pushed over 'in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions' alludes to this habit of pinpointing elements in a literary text and taking them as evidence of historical truth. (See also p8 below)

Turning to the final work to be considered in part 1, we go back to Ker for his *Epic and Romance*, (1896) in which his personal preference for the 'pure' heroic epic again shows through in many of his judgements and comments as in *The Dark Ages*. Already in this earlier work, [romance](#)

seems held to be a decay of the heroic epic and Ker, whether consciously or not, frequently uses the language of war to describe the relationship between epic and romance:

The composite far-fetched romance of the age of chivalry, imported from all countries and literatures to satisfy the medieval appetite for novel and wonderful things.

Nevertheless the stronger kind of poetry had still something to show, before all things were overgrown with imported legend, and before the strong enunciation of the older manner was put out of fashion by the medieval clerks and rhetoricians. (Ker, 1896, 29)

It is plain from the beginning that French epic had to keep its ground with some difficulty against the challenge of romantic skirmishers.' (Ker, 1896, 31)

Ker displays throughout his discussions of epic and romance an almost personal sense of loss in his contemplation of the 'decline' of epic and the 'upstart' romance that fills its place in the affections of the public. For him epic is the highest and strongest form and he seems unable to accommodate the idea that romance is a development rather than a corruption. He speaks of 'progress' in literature (page 4 above) but for him that progress stops when the epic form is at its peak. The move to romance as the dominant form may be a progression, but for Ker it is a decline, not progress.

Ker, Bowra and Chadwick, in their long, detailed, deeply researched works elucidating the nature and scope of Heroic and related writings, all tend to assume that the heroic form is necessarily moving away from earlier forms such as mythology in an almost purposive way, and that this is a sign of humanity ('man') moving onto 'higher' ways of living and thinking that bring about concomitantly 'improved' forms of oral and written literature. For them the birth of romance is the dying fall of epic. In spite of these authors' high scholarly achievements, these assumptions have constrained their ways of working and the assessments they made.

### ***Entr'acte: other ways of seeing***

....ever since Don Quixote the novel has been the main literary form, and the romance a sub-literary one, long superseded. At any rate, among literary critics. – Tom Shippey, 2019, 232

But fortunately not all literary critics and theorists. George Saintsbury's *The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory* (1897) unlike the works considered in Part 1 above, is an exposition of romance without reference back to epic as a superior form. Saintsbury thinks in terms of development rather than decrying a lack of 'progress', seeing *chansons de geste* as successors of epic and romance as a development from the *geste*. In his third chapter, 'The Matter of Britain' (1897, 85-145), Saintsbury traces the coming together of the separate strands of the Arthurian tales into 'one indivisible romance.' His knowledge of and passion for his theme is as great as that of the three scholars in part one, but he is far less given to negative comments or to any suggestion that romance should be seen as any less important than epic. His description of Lancelot as 'a directly and naturally spontaneous literary growth' (1897, 120) would stand very well as his attitude to the growth of the romance in general.

J. R. R. Tolkien's *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* was the 1936 Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture of the British Academy. It was first published in that year in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, and has since been reprinted in many collections. It remains an important source for the study of *Beowulf* since Tolkien overturned in this lecture many assumptions that had become unquestioned commonplaces of *Beowulf* criticism.

In the course of the lecture he reflects on elements of previous criticism of *Beowulf* in terms that have fed into my own reflections above; that much energy has gone into historical and antiquarian research into heroic poems, and too little into literary criticism of ancient poetry as poetry: 'Nearly all the censure, and most of the praise, that has been bestowed on *The Beowulf* has been due either to the belief that it was something that it was *not*...or to disappointment at the discovery that it was itself and not something that the scholar would have liked better.' (Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 1983, 7)

He also refers to Ker's characterisation of *Beowulf*, noted above, (4) of the 'radical defect...that puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the outer edges.' (Ker, 1897, 253) The irrelevances, as Ker names them, are the supernatural elements: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the Dragon. It is these that led some early scholars to dismiss *Beowulf* as 'a wild folk-tale.' (Tolkien, 1936, 8) I suggest that this dislike of supernatural creatures in heroic poems as primitive aspects that should have been left behind, chimes with Bowra's and Ker's dislike

of romance elements' 'intrusion' into the heroic in the later mediaeval period. What 'the scholar would have liked better' seems to have been a very pure heroism indeed, cut off neatly from its predecessors and successors.

Northrop Frye developed in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) a theory of fictional modes 'classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action.' (1957, 33) The status of the hero differs in each mode: myth – the hero as divine being; romance – the hero as superior in degree, but not divine, having a superiority to the everyday environment; high mimetic (epic and tragedy) – the hero as leader, 'subject both to social criticism and the order of nature'; low mimetic (comedy and realistic fiction) – the hero as one of us; ironic – the hero as 'inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves. (1957, 33-34) The importance of this escape from typology and literary archaeology into the concept of modality is enormous. Since the modes may appear in association in any given work, the critic need expend less effort on discussion of *what* the work is, but can directly assess it for the totality of its qualities. It can be considered as 'itself and not something that the scholar would have liked better.' (Tolkien, 1983, 7)

The most relevant of Frye's modes to this exploration are the modes of high mimetic (heroic epic) and romance, since these are basic to the development of the fantasy fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, solidly based upon heroic romance.

Any long poem gets to be called an epic, especially if it is divided into about a dozen or so parts... (1957, 246)

The complete form of the Romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a complete form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. (1957, 187)

Frye's assertion of the quest as the heart of romance clearly implies the growth of romance as development rather than decline, since epic heroes too pursue structured quests.

D. M. Hill's 'Romance as Epic' (1963) directly challenges Ker's near-obsession with definition and comparison, from the beginning of his article. The first paragraph is worth quoting in full:

Most critics who have discussed medieval romance in any general way have found themselves obliged to consider its

relationship to epic, the preferred literature. The obligation is apparent because comparisons are a necessary part of literary appreciation and judgment, and, for romance, epic is the immediate predecessor and handy yardstick. But this particular comparison is full of danger because the terms 'epic' and 'romance' are not neutral labels, being themselves judgments. Epic means something good to most people in terms of weight, substance, seriousness of purpose, endurance and so on. The worst it can involve is dullness, sheer bulk. Romance, if it is a good at all, is a very questionable good. More often than not it is used to stress some aspect of the divorce, or escape, or morally reprehensible departure from the immediate and practical and sane, from 'real life'. (Hill, 1963, 95)

Hill goes on to typify Ker's 'critical bias' through the earlier scholar's evident preference for what Ker calls the 'favourite adventure of the 'earlier heroic manner' – 'the defence of a narrow place against odds.' (Ker, 1897, 5) By contrast, Ker refers to the favourite adventure of romance as a 'collision of blind forces' between two knights errant. (Ker, 1897, 6) Epic, according to Ker, 'Involves weight and solidity' while Romance 'involves mystery and fantasy.' (1963, 97) Hill notes that 'A number of critics, in their attempts to assess the nature of romance writing, have begun by making distinctions between such writing and epic.' (1963, 101) He suggests that this use of the epic as a starting point can lead to viewing epic as a 'kind of literary absolute' (1963, 101) and missing any sense of continuity between the two kinds.

The rest of the article is devoted to tracing that continuity by examination of structure, theme and symbolism that occur in romance in developed form from the epic. These include: symmetrical structure; ring-giving as an epic symbol of loyalty between leader and follower and a romantic token between lovers and close friends; the symbolism of water; the proffering of the drinking cup. Finally Hill states:

The more one looks at the tradition the more one is impressed by the continuity. Ker says at one point that romance is one element in epic. It is more true to say that epic broadens out into romance. Romance is the inclusive term, for its subject matter is anything from war to delicate analyses of relationships between lovers, and its techniques are more varied. Epic serves as a literature to people for whom fighting (and, through it, enduring) is the essential requirement for survival. Romance is occupied with the problems of people who have

got some distance away from the immediate and stark question of survival. (1963, 105)

Hill's assessment is a mirror image of those in Part I above, asserting as a positive what Ker, Bowra and Chadwick see as a negative. For Hill, change is embodied in continuity and need not be characterised as disruption or decline.

Eugene Vinaver's 'From epic to romance' (1964) and *The Rise of Romance* (1971) both consider the conception of the relationship of epic and romance as part of a societal shift. Vinaver describes *The Rise of Romance* as exploring 'the early development of a literary form [romance] which is the foundation of narrative literature in the modern sense.' (1971, xii)

In the earlier paper, he challenges terms in which 'the change from epic to romance is usually described', as a 'shift from one type of subject to another..' (1964, 466-467) He requires his readers to 'transpose our thoughts into a different key' and focuses on the moment recorded by St. Augustine in which Augustine was struck by the sight of St. Ambrose reading silently and alone. 'He was' says Vinaver 'watching the birth of a new world.' The shift would open the era of solitary readers, of the evocation of 'silent mental images evoked by written characters.' For Vinaver this shift is paralleled by the rise of romance, which was 'the birth of a world in which vernacular writings were to [address]the reader through the medium of visible, not audible signals.' (1964, 479)

There follows a long analysis of the nature of epic narrative, (1964, 479-487) focused chiefly upon *The Song of Roland*. Vinaver notes that the epic may present at high points of its tale more than one 'separate vision of the same event,' contrasting that with later expectations of 'a narrative of events as a temporal sequence' (1964, 484) and that the death of Roland 'is not the outcome of a series of rationally motivated events,' (1964, 487) while 'the most important distinguishing feature of romance is...fundamental to what we normally mean by literature.' In the 'thematic mode' of romance 'the story proceeds step by step and each new step is treated as part of a continuous logical and chronological arrangement.' (1964, 488) Romance reveals theme where epic relies on event. Vinaver perceives the chief difference between romance and epic in his final paragraph:

the essential novelty of romance is not that it breaks away from the medieval view of literary art but that it draws from the deep recesses of the contemporary mind something which until then had no place in vernacular narrative poetry:

the urge not merely to move and to impress, but to understand and to stimulate understanding. (1964, 503)

This insight will feed into Part Two below, which considers four modern authors' impressions of the growth of fantasy fiction as a continuing 'rise' of heroic romance.

Vinaver further developed his thoughts on romance in *The Rise of Romance* (1971). Material from the earlier paper underlies the book, and Vinaver broadens his discourse to explain the distinction between the '*conte d'aventure*' and that of the *conjointure*, the latter being the courtly pattern evolved from the former. (1971, 41) Drawing on Chrétien de Troye's usage, Vinaver thus explains the shift in romance writing towards the conscious design of the work by the author, aimed at clarifying meaning in narrative rather than simply events. '*Conjointure* is merely a method of dealing with the material; it is not a substitute for the *conte*, but something which a skilful author can and must superimpose upon it.' (1971, 37)

The status of romance is strongly asserted here:

'In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries...the measure of artistry was the ability not to invent new stories, but to build up sequences out of the existing ones...the elaboration and transmission of inherited material.' (1971, 54)

This foreshadows the later developments in Victorian romance and the fantasy fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when many old tales were retold in new guises or set within subcreated worlds resembling the worlds of epic and romance. The new direction towards sequential narrative and the emphasis on meaning within romance continue to underpin the latest novelistic treatments of heroic romance, or epic fantasy. Vinaver says of Chrétien 'he made it clear that the purpose of poetic composition as he saw it was to give meaning and coherence to amorphous matter.' (1971, 68) Although some nineteenth century critics 'failed to make sense of [romance's] maze of adventures, quests and battles' (1971, 69) Vinaver attributes this, during this phase of rediscovery of romance, to the unfamiliarity of the *entrelacement* technique to those later scholars. This 'device of interweaving a number of separate themes' (1971, 71) was 'puzzling, not to say alarming' (1971, 72) to the very generation of scholars that sought to rediscover the literature of medieval Europe. 'The adventures which constitute the great cycles of romances...become part of a carefully thought-out design of fantastic dimensions...which it will take the modern world nearly half a millennium to rediscover.' (1971, 76-77)

This entr'acte has shown selected examples of changing attitudes to the romance in critical thinking from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Part Two will turn to writings about fantasy fiction, the descendant of epic and romance.

## **Part Two: The Rise of Fantasy Fiction**

'I wanted heroic legends and high romance. - Tolkien, 1964 (Letter 257)

After reading *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Naomi Mitchison said, 'It's odd you know; one takes it completely seriously: as seriously as Malory.' Four hundred and sixteen years after Caxton's redaction of Malory's work was published, Tolkien's first volume of a heroic romance came out to both huge acclaim and angry contempt.. Although works of romance-based literature were not entirely new in the twentieth century, having been preceded by William Morris, Swinburne, Cabell and Dunsany, Tolkien's work divided opinion in the same way the works of the pre-Raphaelites and Dunsany had done. Praised by C.S. Lewis and W. H. Auden, yet damned by Edmund Wilson in scathing terms: 'These characters who are no characters are involved in interminable adventures the poverty of invention displayed in which is, it seems to me, almost pathetic.'<sup>6</sup>

This sharp division was revived when *The Lord of the Rings* was voted book of the century 1997 and book of the millennium in 1999.<sup>7</sup>

Post-Tolkienian heroic romance has continued to divide reviewers and scholars in a similar way to that discussed in part one above. Literary fiction takes the place of epic as 'good' while heroic romance fiction takes the place of medieval romance as 'bad.' The growth of scholarship taking seriously the work of Tolkien has been exponential through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is the re-rise of heroic romance and this section will look at some studies of the rising genre.

Lloyd Alexander's article 'High Fantasy and Heroic Romance' (1971) looks at the continuity of the fantastic genre from early times, and does so from the perspective of a writer of fantasy. He says, 'I am amazed and thankful we can still be deeply moved by worlds that never existed and touched by the fate of people who are figments of our imagination.' (1971, 1) Tracing 'mythology's historical growth into an art form' he states, 'one form that draws most directly from the fountainhead of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://bookmarks.reviews/c-s-lewis-w-h-auden-and-edmund-wilson-on-the-lord-of-the-rings/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ndnation.com/boards/showpost.php?b=backroom;pid=735424;d=all>

mythology, and does it consciously and deliberately, is the heroic romance, which is a form of high fantasy.'

Alexander emphasises that 'a writer of fantasy...must find the essential content of his work within himself.' (1971, 6) Referencing Tolkien's motif of 'The Cauldron of Story,' (1971, 3) he describes his own methods of working traditional elements of romance into his fantasy works. The description is reminiscent of Vinaver (above p11) on the nature of artistry: 'the elaboration and transmission of inherited material.'

In his closing paragraphs Alexander defends the value of fantasy fiction – heroic romance – for children. This was a necessity in the 1970's and shaped my own M.Phil. thesis in ways I would not now consider. A faint shadow of denigration still lingered in the air from the days when 'epic' meant heroic and good, while 'romance' meant airy-fairy and bad. Fifteen years later another author began from a place of confidence and assertion in a positive assessment of heroic romance.

Stephen R. Donaldson's *The chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, published between 2007 and 2013, were among the very many post-Tolkien fantasy works to be promoted by their publishers by reference to Tolkien as a yardstick of content and quality. In fact Donaldson, Le Guin, Jordan, and their myriad successors include very many whose work can be safely judged on its own merits. What the 'après-Tolkien' advertising demonstrates is that the work dismissed in horror by 'the establishment' became a turning-point for readers, publishers, and younger authors seeking to publish fantasy.

Donaldson's 'Epic fantasy in the modern world; a few observations' (1986) begins by asking why his own work has become so enormously successful. 'My ambitions as a writer have always been intensely "serious"...and so the idea that my books would become popular just never crossed my mind.' (1986,1) His conclusion, and the theme of the rest of the article, is: 'The **why** rests on the **what**. **What** I write is 'epic fantasy' and I think it succeeds because it is both epic and fantasy.'<sup>8</sup> [i.e. heroic and romance.]

Donaldson defines fantasy as 'a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external.' This echoes comments by earlier scholars. Ker states; 'In Roland, and very generally in French epic, there is an envelopment of impersonal thoughts all round the action and the characters. They stand for France and the true religion; and the heroes lose as *dramatis personae* what they gain as representing grand ideas.' (Ker, 1904, 353) For Vinaver

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<sup>8</sup> Words in **bold** in this extract are **bold** in Donaldson's original.

(1971) it is not 'permissible for us to classify Chrétien's romances as examples of psychological realism in the modern sense of the term. Chrétien lets the characters enact a line of argument that happens to interest him.' (Vinaver, 1971, 30)

Donaldson clearly perceives a continuity of theme, characterisation and narrative method from myth, through legend, epic and romance to fantasy fiction. He further notes, when discussing the fact that 'fantasy tends to appear allegorical,' (1986, 6) that Tolkien, 'using the narrative tools of allegory...was actually writing fiction far more complex than allegory.' (1986, 6) Without directly referencing *Anatomy of Criticism* it seems that Donaldson, like Frye, is thinking in terms of literary modes and their functions within texts, rather than seeking one defining characteristic that will pin down what fantasy is.

The rest of Donaldson's paper discusses epic works from Beowulf to Tolkien, in terms of his own understanding of epic/heroic and fantasy/romance. Of Thomas Covenant he says, 'I wanted to take a fantasy-rejecting modern human being and force him to confront all the implications of an epic vision.' (1986, 15) The long story of Covenant contains all the elements of the heroic epic, romance and modern fantasy. Donaldson's exploration of the popularity of his own works binds up many loose ends of earlier scholarship and criticism.<sup>9</sup>

In 2010 Thomas Honegger published 'Heroic Fantasy and the Middle Ages - Strange Bedfellows or an Ideal Cast?' He explores this question by looking at works by Robert E. Howard, C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and examining the concept of knighthood as it appears in the popular imagination, and in fantasy fiction. That concept he describes as not a historical period in a scholarly sense, but a 'temporal fantasy', i.e. a place in time that offers something to modern readers and 'seems to be of use for a number of writers of modern fantasy.' (2010, 62)

This fantasy place is perceived as containing Knights, courtly and chivalrous; courtly love (neglected by most fantasy writers, says Honegger); and 'non-alienation.' (2010, 64) The knight is the chief symbol of non-alienation, an example of life in an earlier time when industrialization had not cut humanity off from its environment. This idealization of the middle ages extends to sentimentalisation of what is seen as the clearly ordered hierarchical society of the middle ages. Honegger says: 'these characteristics...projected onto the medieval world where personal actions are able to change society...also prove attractive

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately he describes Tolkien as 'divorcing his work entirely from the real world.' (1986, 14) This is debatable as Middle-earth is a proposed by Tolkien as an early state of the 'real' world.

to a modern readership of fantasy.’ (2010, 66) Honegger then touches on Frye’s concept of modes when he says that the ‘literary and textual strategies’ that typify romance ‘are not limited to texts classified as romances proper, but may also occur elsewhere.’ (2010, 66) It is this ‘shared literary strategy’ that Honegger perceives as the true relationship between medieval romance and heroic fantasy, a relationship that goes much deeper than the existence in both literatures of similar characters: (knights, dragons, wizards); similar motifs (quests, obscured identities, the marvellous) and similar narrative tropes: (digression, *aventure*). (2010, 68)

The last critical works to be considered here are Martin Simonson’s ‘Epic and Romance in *The Lord of the Rings*,’ (2016) and his *The Lord of the Rings and the Western Narrative Tradition*.’ (2008) Although both works are focused on Tolkien, they serve as the perfect last items in this survey, as Simonson’s emphasis is on the continuity of genres, modes and narrative strategies from epic through to the modern novel. In elucidating the nature of Tolkien’s narrative composition, he draws together the strands of this discussion ‘In Tolkien’s work...the Western narrative traditions – myth, epic, romance, the novel – interact in a previously unknown but still very much coherent world that...exhibits a clear contextualization of references to the previous traditions.’ (2016, 65)

While accepting that epic and romance features may well be dominant in *The Lord of the Rings*, and examining those features closely in his 2016 article, Simonson believes it impossible to interpret the work purely in genre-based terms. He speaks of ‘the generic distinctiveness of Tolkien’s alluring narrative.’ (2016, 75) In both the 2016 article and the 2008 book, Simonson elucidates the integration in Tolkien’s writing of different narrative paradigms, and the ways in which the narrative structure of LOTR is made up substantially by the tension operating between ‘different genres in dialogue with each other.’ (2016, 75)

One of Simonson’s chapter headings in 2008 was ‘The western narrative tradition: a matter of constant fusion.’ (2008, 19-67) This emphasis on fusion shows how far critical academic thought has moved on from the approach of the scholars considered in Part One above. From their attention to the separatist definition of genres — epic, romance, heroic, *contes de geste* — and on their work as a foundation, scholarship has arrived at a point at which a single work of literature may be discussed, as Simonson discusses *The Lord of The Rings*, in terms of its conscious interactions between different narrative traditions.

## Conclusions

For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it's true. Children know that. Adults know it too and that's precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom - Ursula K. LeGuin, 1985, 44.

This paper has selected and discussed some examples of literary critical and scholarly approaches to the elucidation of the early forms of literature that underlie twentieth and twenty-first century heroic romance: epic, romance, heroic and the literary forms that combined these.

It has shown that nineteenth and early twentieth century critics and scholars, in focusing on explaining the nature and characteristics of the early genres, sometimes fell into an assumption that heroism lay in the epic alone and that the societal shift that brought romance into popular and courtly literature was a sort of decline.

However, gradually the emphases of scholarship have shifted in their turn, and the restoration of romance and the heroic as elements in the growth of heroic fantasy/romance has led to a clearer understanding of the true status of romance. The movement away from definition of genres to the assessment of literary works on their own merits has led to an understanding of how the separate modes of fiction and its varied paradigms may come together in one work. One may hope that eventually the critical habit of denigrating works of fantasy may give way to an understanding of its full place in the history of literature.

## The Last Word:

[Tolkien's] fiction has and will continue to recapture for an audience raised on realism and thinly nourished by the modern novel the excitement and wonder of time-travelling into Faërie, into the older modes of literature of epic and romance and fairy tale.' - Verlyn Flieger, 1997, 257

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[Author's note: A funny thing happened to me on the way to publication. Having been invited to contribute to a collection for Cambridge Scholars' Press, to be titled 'The Rise and Rise of Heroic Romance', I finished my draft the day before receiving notice that the project had been cancelled due to lack of response. Hence I am placing it about the internet in the hope that some fellow-scholars may find it interesting. SB October 2021]